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# Memory production, vandalism, violence: Civil society and lessons from a short life of a monument to Stalin

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

On September 15th 2016, the leaders of youth group the “Russian Spirit,”<sup>2</sup> unveiled a monument to Stalin in the Siberian city Surgut, located in central Russia. The bust was erected a few meters away from a display board, which states, “In some time at this place there will be a monument to the victims of Soviet Repressions.”<sup>3</sup> Someone poured red paint over Stalin’s bust twice and wrote “henchman” on the side. The first time vandalism occurred was the day after the installation. The local municipalities removed the monument three weeks after due to the absence of state authorization and also because the monument lacked “public toleration.” The defacement of the statue and the formulation of the city council of Surgut, triggered an inquiry on what is “public toleration” and how should one react to monuments of perpetrators in a public domain? Should the memorial exist, in the spirit of toleration of the views which disturb, outrage, and lack respect for the millions of victims? Or is the approach of the municipalities that banned the monument and the “good” civil society that repeatedly vandalized the monument appropriate? I argue for the latter.

Traditionally, civil society is perceived as a “watchdog” of society, a guarantor of democracy, and as an inherently positive institution. This work calls for a reimagination of the role of civil society engaged with memory initiatives and argues that limits to toleration of “uncivil” civil society exist. We should not presume that civil society initiatives are always respectful of victims, tolerance, and diversity. An analysis of the qualities or “textures” and “temperature,” of civil society gives a more accurate picture of civil society operating in a particular milieu (Krygier, 2002). This work assesses the posts on social media, the official website of the organization “Russian Spirit,” newspaper articles, and secondary interviews from September 2015 (a date before the erection of the monument), to the present day to examine the qualities of the civil society.

The paper first provides a working definition of the term “civil society.” I then examine the power dynamics behind memory politics through the history and historiography of memory production and the specifics of Stalinist and anti-Stalinist attitudes in the Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. This paper further outlines the characteristics of “uncivil” civil

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society. The work concludes by discussing potential paths of enduring revisionism, elaborating on the possibilities of toleration, resistance, condemning violence, and imposing restrictions through legal means.

## 2 | TERMINOLOGY: "CIVIL SOCIETY"

The definition of "civil society" is disputed and not static; it evolves and differs depending on the context and on the continually changing modes of participation and communication. The key characteristics, attributable to the concept of "civil society" as defined in the 19th century, are: "individuality, plurality, publicity" (Cohen & Arato, 1994, p. 14). The concept of "civil society" implies the realization of the social dimension but also of "individual development and ethical choice" (Cohen & Arato, 1994, p. 14). It also suggests that diverse groups of people form civil society and articulate their views publicly through the available communicative channels.

The 20th century contributed to three primary attributes of civil society (Cohen & Arato, 1994). The first attribute relates to civil society as a site of contestation of ideas and contribution to the collective identity (Cohen & Arato, 1994). The second conveys that civil society also consists of "informal networks, initiatives and social movements" (Cohen & Arato, 1994, p. 14). The emphasis is put on detachment from the formal and institutionalized organizations. The third attribute relates to the development of the concept of "public sphere" as outlined by Habermas (1989). Thus, the deliberative and communicative functions of civil society were further developed (Cohen & Arato, 1994). This can be seen in the fact that modern democracies are based on the idea that the actions and policies formulated from "above" are subject to contestation and affirmation from "below." This shift means that the citizens can question the practices of a government in public deliberative settings (Cohen & Arato, 1994).

The scope of the concept of "civil society" is now broader, which enables new forms of civil society to appear and be recognized. Gready and Robins (2017) suggest that the notion of civil society should apply broadly to every type of collective action and should not be restricted to nongovernment organizations (NGOs) that focus on human rights. For a posttotalitarian context, an extended definition, which transcends the narrow understanding of civil society based on institutions and political activities, is essential due to the danger that the state might restrict traditional channels of operations of civil society through legal means.

The term "civil society" has different meanings in the West and the postcommunist space. Civil society in the postcommunist countries is perceived in a strictly political, often oppositional, sense. In contrast, in the West, civil society is linked to associational life, as famously coined by Putnam (1995). Another tendency concerning civil society in the former republics of the Soviet Union is pointing to the "uncivil" nature of civil society, which increasingly has embarked on nationalism and populism (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003). These bleak prospects are due to the narrow definition of civil society and selective use of the term, which would include only "prodemocratic" civil society, leaving everything that does not meet this criterion, behind (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003). Kopecky and Mudde (2003) state that "uncivil" civil society in Eastern Europe is closer to the needs of the local people than the Western NGOs, which the authors call "virtual civil society" because they do not contribute to the democratization efforts locally but are driven by the global elite's interests. They exist only on paper rather than have any tangible effect (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003).

Keeping the ambiguities and indecisiveness associated with "the much-contested but yet fashionable term" (Crocker, 2008, p. 500) "civil society" in mind, this work defines "civil society" as not state-run and noncommercial goals driven groups. The paper focuses on civil society that engages with memorization of the past and attempts of post-Soviet Russian society to overcome the legacies of the Soviet repressions. Following Habermas (1989), the essay deems the communicative dimension and the ability to transfer a message to the public sphere to be at the core of the concept of civil society. The activities of civil society can be dispersed in time and space. Although the "Russian Spirit" is not a registered group, and it does not represent a positive development as it endangers democratic institutions, the "Russian Spirit" is nonetheless a part of civil society.

The liberal understanding of the term "civil society" is not illustrative of the condition of civil society in postconflict or postauthoritarian societies, where the society is divided, and the local actors question the legitimacy of the new

government (Wallis, 2019). In Russia, where the state is strong, civil society does not represent a threat to the government. To the contrary, the nationalist, right-wing civil society often endorses the state's agenda. It is not a case of a "good" state after "transition" and a "bad" civil society undermining its legitimacy. On the opposite, civil society at focus either explicitly or implicitly supports the state's approach to the past—it also engages in whitewashing and rewriting of history.

### 3 | HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MEMORY PRODUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF STALINIST MYTH FROM KHRUSHCHEV TO PUTIN

Concerning the monument to Stalin in Surgut, we examine both the actions of the "Russian Spirit" and the discourse around them. The "Russian Spirit" is an organization created to be an alternative source of news—"useful" and "nonelite,"<sup>4</sup> as their website states.<sup>5</sup> The official social media page on Vkontakte,<sup>6</sup> the Russian analogue of Facebook declares that May 9th, 1945, is the "date of birth" of the organization. The identification with WWII Victory Day points to the glorification of the war by the group and attribution of the victory to Stalin.

Stalin's myth, on which the "Russian Spirit" draws, is based on the myth of World War II, employed by both the Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, for various purposes. During the Soviet period, it was used for rebuilding the country postwar. The WWII myth was used for boosting economy, creating a sense of national pride, justifying a gulag system, reaffirming the Leninist myth of socialism as the ultimate model of governance, and creating a heroic narrative.

Dismantling the myth of Stalin began with Khrushchev; first during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party on February 25th, 1956, and then the 21st Congress in October 1961. Both speeches were half-hearted, yet essential measures to delegitimize the cult of the personality of Stalin. Khrushchev's secret speech was a vital milestone, which nevertheless did not end gulags and did not result in greater democratization of the system. The myth of WWII was already strongly rooted in the minds of Soviet citizens, for whom the memory of the war was still fresh. The cleansing of system from Stalin's henchmen, by summarily executing the henchmen on false charges of espionage and treason was more of "a self-serving tactic" by Khrushchev (Nuzov, 2013, p. 287). This way he wanted to eliminate party fractions and to create, for himself, a fruitful foundation for leadership, rather than attempt to bring to accountability the mass murderers (Nuzov, 2013, p. 287). Khrushchev numerously contended that he was complicit in crimes by saying, "I have blood on my hands up to my elbows" (as quoted in Nuzov, 2013, p. 285). Faced with strong neo-Stalinist opposition, Khrushchev still managed to rehabilitate a significant number of people (Nuzov, 2013). After Khrushchev no longer held power and until Gorbachev's leadership, during Brezhnevite Stalinist myth reconstruction, the topic of Stalinist repressions became taboo, and the terror victims were "relegated to the status of silent witnesses" (Adler, 2012, p. 332). Brezhnev's rule, together with the ban on a critique of Stalin, was marked with the resurrection of authoritarian rule, as well as the invasion of Czechoslovakia, accompanied by the violent suppression of protests, and resumed purges against Soviet intelligentsia.

*Perestroika*, Gorbachev's liberalization of the system and the rethinking of the Soviet experience was a time when people wanted to discover the truth about the Stalinist crimes. Stalin's supporters formed a marginal minority at that time. The Soviet myth-making was dependent on the status of actors, who shaped and transmitted the myth, as well as creating "personal bonding in making elites" (Weiner, 1996, p. 640). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, before the start of the economic downturn in Russia, people were protesting on the streets, demanding to open archives and show the places of burial of the executed victims. Before *perestroika*, most of the population accepted the Soviet myth. *Perestroika* policies resulted in rapid destruction of the myth and "destabilization of the system," or a "mental revolution, a logical screw" (Sherlock, 2007, p. 22).

The article by Andreeva, "I cannot compromise on principles," in 1988,<sup>7</sup> was one of the primary *counterperestroika* triggers. In this article, a teacher of chemistry made a harsh assessment of *perestroika*. The teacher was praising Stalin for combatting Nazism, demanding adherence to Marxist–Leninist principles, which, in her views, Gorbachev betrayed

by being pro-Western and cosmopolitan. Gorbachev successfully overpowered the response that the article created with the article by Yakovlev on the principles of *perestroika*, signifying revolutionary thinking.

A foundational myth, for example, the myth of Lenin and October Revolution, allows the power to justify its “privileged position of the strategic elite” (Sherlock, 2007, p. 20). The creation of a foundational myth was on the agenda of all the presidents of Russia after the transition. This involved rethinking the past to create a metanarrative people could identify with (Sherlock, 2007, p. 21). The myth creation relates to the “dramatic rendition of past events” to signal that the problems of today are resolved (Sherlock, 2007, p. 5). It provides a feeling of identification, appealing to emotion in a way that the population is an active participant in the process as well (Sherlock, 2007, p. 5). So, the relationship between myth production and reproduction between the state and society at large is mutually reciprocal.

Understanding the need for appealing to the public, Putin took a different form of Yeltsin’s reluctant efforts of myth making. Instead, he adopted an “uplifting narrative of *tsarist* and Soviet past” (Sherlock, 2007, p. 21). One of the most quoted phrases is Putin’s portrayal of the breakup of the USSR as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.”<sup>8</sup> Putin’s creation is “the myth of the ‘Great Patriotic War,’ [which] is crucial to the understanding of Putin’s regime because it initiated the ideological consensus between the authorities and society” (Khapayeva, 2016, p. 64). The popular WWII myth generates an emotional attachment among society and proves that “nationalism may idolize heroes, and it likes victories” (Brown & Ní Aoláin, 2015, p. 141). Fish (2001, p. 74) purports that Putin’s strategy concerning ideology is the replacement of communism with the three “readily visible institutions as objects of affection and respect”: “the presidency and the President himself,” the military, and the law. The appeal to the identity construction and the myth creation is visible in “the political slang which came into popular currency during Putin’s reign (successor, agents of influence, demographic crisis, stabilization fund, internal enemy, spiritual confusion)” (Etkind, 2009, p. 191). To further the trend, the Ministry of Education endorsed the history textbook by Filippov (2007), which refers to Stalin as “an effective manager”. President Medvedev in 2010 introduced a short-lived and ridiculed Historical Commission, referred by commentators as the “Orwellian initiative,” with the imposition of administrative liability for those engaged in “falsifications of history to the detriment of Russia’s interests.” Medvedev’s Commission is another example of the state’s control over the interpretation of history and memory production.

A variety of factors determines memory politics; a balance of power is essential, yet not the only factor. In the Russian context, a need for identity building was one of the critical factors that shaped memory politics. For many Russians, the Leninist and the WWII myths were the only belief systems they had (Adler, 2012). The memory of the past determines the construction of national identity: “the past becomes the benchmark against which the self attempts to verify its present identity” (Mälksoo, 2016, p. 10). The fall of the Soviet Union for Russian citizens resulted in an identity vacuum. To fill this vacuum, Putin endorsed the WWII myth. As convincingly argued by Grandville (2012), if the national identity is linked to past crimes, the memory construction will not lead to the democratization process, as the relationship between memory and identity is reciprocal.

Here we draw on the shift of who is an agent of memory, envisioned by Benjamin (1968), and how collective memory, personal, and family memory became dominated by cultural memory. Cultural memory manifests in arts, film, different kinds of media, and public education. The agents of memory are not so much ethnicities or nations as a group (Halbwachs, 1992), or the three generations of victims and those who bore witness (Assmann, 2018),<sup>9</sup> but those actors, who dominate the cultural domain. It is the fight over winning of hearts and minds of people through cultural means of reproduction and public education, which are mostly monopolized by the state. As argued by Chambers (2001, p. 150), “... the more serious problem is with groups that spread a culture of hate rather than engage in violence. Here the defense must be alternative venues of cultural creation...” It is unlikely that someone in Russia, who is not driven by personal or professional interest, will consult archives, read monographs and memoirs, or read the (not so optimistic) literature on the period. Most likely, that person will consume (not selectively), the information provided by the state most often, through state-controlled television, without seeking any alternative sources of evidence. The state narrative dominates over individual or group accounts of victims.

The narrative of the “Russian Spirit” mostly follows the metanarrative of the state. They have adopted the political slang of Putin’s reign, namely, “moral crisis, decaying West, degradation of masses, support for destructive tendencies

in society, Russia's unique spirit, protecting children from harmful information, and agents of influence."<sup>10</sup> The group focuses on "the popularization of Russian worldview" and pays particular emphasis on national identity ("Russian—is not a nationality, but the belonging to the great and ancient civilization").<sup>11</sup> The group adopts exclusionary rhetoric of "obsolete unitary notion of culture" an "us vs them" rhetoric and the claim over monopoly on truth and righteousness (Huyssen, 2011, p. 619).

Little information about the "Russian Spirit" is available on their website, last updated three years ago.<sup>12</sup> As it is not a registered group, they do not mention the number of members nor the criteria for joining. The leader of the group, Denis Khanzhin, is a graduate of Surgut State University in automated systems and computer technology. Khanzhin works for a public organization called "Chornyi Mys," and is a member of the "Working Youth of Siberia."<sup>13</sup>

An estimated twenty people attended the ceremony opening the monument to Stalin in Surgut, with lying of flowers (red carnations, often used for WWII celebration) and pronouncement of speeches. Two people dressed in Soviet army uniforms stood guard at the monument. After the first-time red paint was poured on the monument; someone removed the paint straight away. But no one removed the paint after the incident reoccurred. The monument had the following quote of Stalin engraved with golden letters: "After my death, much garbage will be brought to my grave. But the wind of history will blow it away."<sup>14</sup> The wind blew away two letters from the sign, leaving Stalin's bust facing the river Ob with red paint on his head and an incomprehensible quote with missing letters.

The bust was made in the Ossetia region of Russia, which has a rather large number of Stalin's monuments, and therefore, the creation of the bust was quick. The fundraising campaign lasted for three weeks. A total of 246 people donated 165,033 rubles for the monument.<sup>15</sup> People donated the money to the personal bank account of the leader of the group, Denis Khanzhin. According to Khanzhin, the older generation met the initiative of the monument with great enthusiasm, but the younger people, "had more questions to ask." Khanzhin explains it by the "degradation" of youth and degrading education.<sup>16</sup>

Khanzhin argues that the Khanty-Mansiysk region's policies do not always correspond to the ones in Kremlin.<sup>17</sup> Khanzhin considers himself one of the few people who advances Putin's politics in the region. According to Khanzhin, "Stalin was a victim of political repressions of Khrushchev."<sup>18</sup> Khanzhin received a warning from law enforcement officials for "propaganda of Nazi paraphernalia and symbolism," for appearing at an event dedicated to the victims of the Soviet Repressions with a portrait of Nazi sympathizer, Andrei Vlassov.<sup>19</sup> The motivation behind such actions, according to the supporters of Khanzhin, was to demonstrate that not everyone persecuted during Stalin's rule could be considered a victim of political repressions.<sup>20</sup>

According to the activists of the Surgut victim-support group called "Our Memory,"<sup>21</sup> forcefully transferred people constituted a third of the population of Surgut by 1932. There were no gulags around Surgut. A silver lining of the appearance of Stalin's bust in a public space in Surgut is that it attracted the attention of the city council that promised to help with the installation of the monument to the victims of repressions. For the first time in ten years, thanks to the monument to Stalin, they have finally started talking about the monument to the repressed victims.<sup>22</sup>

The "Russian Spirit" imitates a typical and much favored civil society of the Soviet period. It is not clear whether the membership in such groups as the Communist Party and Komsomol during Soviet times was a personal choice or a quest for the benefits of such memberships: promotion, guaranteed higher pensions, vacations, state-budget apartments, and even goods—from food to socks (Merridale, 2000). Smaller associational groups, like the "Russian Spirit," were usually based on "celebrated virtues of personal hygiene, abstinence from alcohol, cross-country-running" (Merridale, 2000, p. 242). These "virtues" are the foundations of the activities of the "Russian Spirit."

The rhetoric of WWII, a need for a "strong leader," a paternalistic figure who stands for his words, is omnipresent in the videos in favor of Stalin's monument by the "Russian Spirit." "The heritage of Stalin includes his works on economics, politics, sociology. Stalin has established foundations of a new society; a fair distribution of welfare; development of physical and spiritual qualities; a publicly available and effective education; career development for workers from people as opposed to ethnic clans in power," says the leader of the "Russian Spirit," Khanzhin. The "Russian Spirit" appeals to empty signifiers as the "will of common, simple people"; the group is against corruption and poverty. They often refer to Stalin's modest lifestyle: his children worked for the country, he left just a "broken mug and two suitcases

worth of belongings" after his death.<sup>23</sup> Other discourse of the group points at the disenchantment with modernity. They are against alienated social relations, against consumerism, in support of sports and healthy lifestyle, and against immunization. The bust of Stalin remains the biggest project of the organization.

The "Russian Spirit's" beliefs are not about the "clash" of two Stalins—"Stalin the tyrant and Stalin the victor in the Great Patriotic War" (Dubin, 2010, p. 48). For the "Russian Spirit," Stalin is primarily associated with the WWII victory, but they also acknowledge that he was responsible for atrocities. Dubin argues that Stalin combines the two essential sides of the Russian identity—that of the victor and that of the victim. The symbol of "Russia as a victor" is manifested in the narrative of the WWII victory, a powerful empire. (Dubin, 2010, p. 48). The "Russia as a victim" myth points at a martyr, a sufferer who endures and does not complain, who can bypass whatever fate sends, who is poor and honest (Dubin, 2010). Stalin corresponds to both of these myths. Dubin (2010) argues that a more accurate explanation of the perception of Stalin by the Russian population is not that of admiration or hatred, but rather indifference or a sense of mystery. The percentage of those who consider something about Stalin is still unknown is at its height, according to the data in 2008 (Dubin, 2010). The statistics in 2008 suggested that the poorest people, those over 50 years old, and those living in the periphery, are most likely to support Stalin. Dubin (2010) contends that the Stalinist myth will not have any future as the young generation is not adhering to it. It is difficult to give a viable estimate of how accurate the prediction of Dubin (2010) is; especially when considering the increased use of the WWII victory narrative after the annexation of Crimea. However, Dubin (2010) accurately explains and predicts that the image of Stalin will be revoked each time there will be a need to reassure the population in the sacredness of the leader.

#### 4 | STATE POLICY TOWARDS THE PAST

Some argue that Russia's approach to the past lacks mnemonic aspects—thus calling it "organized forgetfulness" or "mass amnesia" (Grandville, 2012, p. 384). But the opposite is true—too many memories exist in Russia. In Etkind's (2013) words, it is a multihistorical environment of nonlinear memory because of the absence of any consistent discourse. We see the logical incongruencies with Putin, celebrating 100 years of existence of the KGB one day, and the next day opening the Memorial to the Victims of Soviet Repressions, quoting Solzhenitsyn's wife that we should "acknowledge, remember, punish, and only then—forgive."

The heroic narrative is dominant in Russia, leaving no space for the victims in the state rhetoric. The re-Stalinization of the 2000s reached its climax in 2014; after the annexation of Crimea, it was a considerable part of Russia's *Realpolitik* (Khapaeva, 2016). The largest number of monuments to Stalin is located in the North Ossetia region—24 (Khapaeva, 2016). In 2001, several major Russian cities erected a monument to Stalin, usually with the lobbying of the KPRF (the Communist Party of the Russian Federation) and under the pretext of tribute to the WWII victory (Khapaeva, 2016).

We cannot make a simplistic analogy between actions of the "Russian Spirit" to that of the state, because actions of the state do not fit a frame of historical amnesia or positive restructuring of the past. One can still provide numerous examples of what would be positive initiatives to foster constructive dialogue about the past, but nearly all the initiatives of the state fall short in commitment, design, implementation, monitoring, the follow-up, failing to consult victims or to take into consideration the interests of those concerned. One example of such initiative is an exposition located in St. Petersburg Museum of Political History in the form of a labyrinth. The exposition is meant to allow the viewer to form his/her/their judgment about the Stalinist regime. The lowering of threshold does not work when it comes to memory, as could be seen from the Monument to the Victims of the Soviet Repressions in Moscow ("the Wall of Sorrow"), commissioned by the state, which did not become "the place of memory." The nature and the scope of violations require more explicit approaches than that.

Adler (2012) argues that what we see is "two competing narratives of the repression—the story of the victims and survivors, and the story of the repressive state's survival" (p. 335). As was persuasively argued by Remnick (2001), "It's as if the regime was guilty of two crimes on a massive scale: murder and the unending assault against memory" (p. 101). The "Russian Spirit" is a by-product of the state's ambivalence to address the Soviet past constructively.



## 5 | “CIVILITY”—A NECESSARY QUALITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY?

The issue of “civility”<sup>24</sup> is discussed because commentators focus only on quantitative aspects of civil society (the more civil society groups—the better approach), failing to analyze the qualities civil society has. The line between civil and “uncivil” society is hard to draw, as no set standards exist. One argument against the dangers of labelling a group as “uncivil” is that civil society is inherently fluid; its actions should be evaluated on a case by case basis. As Kopecky and Mudde (2003) concluded, the same organization through different periods of time can be referred to as a “good” civil society and then “bad” a few years later. We still need adjectives when we discuss civil society.

When evaluating the qualitative characteristics of civil society, one needs to clarify if we look at words or actions, as deeds do not always correspond to words. Although words wound, we are not dealing with issues of hate speech exclusively. The monument is material, visible, and hard to erect or dismantle with no one noticing (Etkind, 2013). A monument is a zone between symbolic and physical, temporal, and spatial, when words and intentions become actions. Monuments are key tools of memory politics; Etkind (2013) argues that they represent “hard memory” - the physical, as opposed to “soft memory,” such as story-telling, arts, and culture. Monuments are meant to generate public discussion.

The “Russian Spirit” and its monument, forces one to question whether a tension between “tolerant pluralism” and communitarian attachments based on “nationalist, religious, and ethnic” principles exists (Krygier, 2002, p. 240). Agnes Heller (2001) argues that for civil society to have cultural memory, it should form an identity. Civil society, according to Heller (2001), cannot be a single-issue movement or based on nostalgia solely. Another reason why such a strong label as “civility” is applied because one associates civil society (and particularly the Soviet dissent) with morality. For the Soviet dissent, as Tismaneanu (2001) contends, “[t]he primary impulse in the phenomenology of resistance is moral” (p. 982). The dissidents themselves had increasingly used the notion of morality as they could not find legitimation in the Soviet legal system.

“Uncivil” for Krygier (2002) means “intense, particularistic, exclusive, and immoderate,” but important nevertheless (p. 240). It can potentially ‘threaten the possibility not merely of civil society, but of any society at all’ (Krygier, 2002, p. 240). Avishai Margalit (1996) in his book *The Decent Society* also differentiates between “civil” and “uncivil” society. “Civility” is when individual members of society do not humiliate others.<sup>25</sup> Nonhumiliation implies treating others with dignity, respect and recognition; especially those with whom we disagree. Civility is manifested in the way people treat others. Civil trust is a particular type of trust; it is not a society when one cannot rely on anybody (other than friendships, family, or love). Although what one considers to be damaging to dignity and self-respect might not be so for another person, given the subjectivity of both notions, it still provides some guidance. The concepts of “self-respect” and “dignity” is constitutive of human rights. A framework which, if properly applied, provides effective guidance for balancing the behavior which, for one group of people represents a right to free expression, but can be offensive to another group.

Another criterion to consider when evaluating the notion of “civility” is adherence to the legal principles or prescribed rules. The adherence to the letter of the law when the law falls short of requirements of morality (however broadly or loosely one defines it) cannot be the sign of “noncivility”. Especially in the context of authoritarian states and usurping laws and institutions, nonadherence to the law is not linked to civility (and might perhaps indicate the opposite). The unruly techniques and the acts of civil disobedience are also constitutive of civil society, even though the very *raison d’être* for them is to go against prescribed rules. The erection of a monument, despite the refusal of municipalities, was not an act of civil disobedience as the group did not intend to protest the rules or to question the status quo. As argued by a supporter of the “Russian Spirit,” it is a common practice in Russia first to do something, and then ask for permission to do so.<sup>26</sup>

Criminality is another characteristic one should assess when examining the concept of “civility.” A paradigmatic example of “uncivil” civil society is mafia (Whitehead, 1997). The installation of the monument to Stalin would not amount to a criminal offence, although the action was illegal. The membership in the group “Russian Spirit,” unlike mafia, is voluntary.



## 6 | POSSIBLE RESPONSES—WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WITH THE “UNCIVIL”?

### 6.1 | Toleration?

According to Christiano (2015), far-right groups (and similar) may exist, but they cannot impose their norms legislatively on others. Another “tolerant” argument in the Liberal tradition would be; as long as they are not violent, we should let them be. Christiano (2015) argues that these groups are not dangerous if they represent “lower risks of harm,” asking if they merit “cautious, sometimes apprehensive toleration” (p. 477). Correcting their cognitive bias from the standpoint of society, which would consider their views inherently false, would not be an option as far-right groups in certain instances represent interests and views of the majority of society. As argued by Kopstein and Hanson (1998), “in post-Soviet Russia neoimperial and even nationalist ideologies are not the monopoly of explicit ‘fascists’” (p. 370). If their views are not based on the tolerance and plurality, is it acceptable to limit their right to freedom of expression and association? One questions whether the fact that these groups do not respect the rights of others, makes their claim to the same rights thinner?

One can explain the marginal status of these groups by a weakness of their interests (Christiano, 2015, p. 477). The “Russian Spirit” praises the wrongdoer; not because they deny the atrocities but because they believe that “the ends justify the means.” The urge not only to admire but also to identify with the henchman, could be explained by cultural and educational policies of the country and the sociopolitical context the group operates in.

One argument for toleration would be the danger that a state will use the label “uncivil” to persecute uncomfortable groups and individuals. Strict censorship can have a chilling effect on public debate, especially in countries where the public debate is silenced and where the public space is minimized (Bejan, 2017). Another argument against strict restrictions is that when one prohibits verbal expression or expression through cultural means, groups start expressing their views through physical violence. Keeping the debate on an oral or cultural level would, arguably, prevent the far-right groups from radicalizing.

The silver lining argument is that the “uncivil” civil society allowed for “civil” to manifest itself. The response of civil society that damaged the monument and local municipalities was tolerant, as it met the threshold of both necessity and proportionality. The pouring of red paint on the monument and writing “henchman” is a moral condemnation of the act. The removal of the monument and the written reply of municipalities is a response through formal means. Both responses demarcated actions that neither the society nor the authorities deem “civil.” Simultaneously, the “Russian Spirit” could dispute restrictions imposed by the city council through their social media pages and other platforms.

### 6.2 | Restricting through state response?

The approach to “bad” civil society was unless they became violent and undermine the rights of others, to leave them alone, as the cost of prohibiting them might be higher than ignoring them. As a result, the movements mobilize not around the idea of rights but due to their ability to communicate and create the culture of xenophobia, racism, and exclusion of anyone different (Chambers, 2001). Chambers argues that relying on the court’s action to prevent dangerous civil society groups from emerging is incorrect. Even the regimes with the most developed court system, as was the case with the Weimar Republic, cannot guarantee that the discourse of rights will prevail in the minds of citizens, who deny the rights-based values (Chambers, 2001). She argues that now the prochoice and feminist movements are learning this lesson; as legal activism is not as effective as building a culture around the ideas. The organizations similar to the “Russian Spirit” are building a culture around violence as a means of governance. They emphasize certain aspects of a lifestyle (such as the lifestyle of patriotic and socially active young people), based on conservative and exclusionary ideas, such as patriarchy or heroization of the past.

A notable example of the state banning monuments in honor of perpetrators is the Israeli Supreme Court's ruling on the destruction of the monument to Baruch Goldstein, a right-wing extremist who murdered 29 Muslim people (McEvoy & Conway, 2004).<sup>27</sup> The monument was erected on Goldstein's tomb and was bulldozed despite the settlers' protests during the demolition (McEvoy & Conway, 2004). The Supreme Court of Israel ruled that prohibition of incitement to violence overruled the right to free speech. The ruling was based on the "Prohibition of Erecting Monuments in Memory of the Perpetrators of Terror Law 1998". This case represents an interference by the court, which argued that it is criminal to "...publish, in writing or orally, words of praise, sympathy or encouragement for acts of violence calculated to cause death or injury" (McEvoy & Conway, 2004, p. 548). For a highly bureaucratic society like Russia, where much praise to the formal approaches is given, determination coming from the Supreme Court (though unlikely, due to the absence of appropriate legislation on the issue), would have a more substantial effect on society, rather than a case-specific decision of local municipalities.

One way we can fight the extreme-right groups is by putting everyone on the same political footing and combating them in a political battle through democratic means, rather than pretending not to hear and openly disregarding the opponent's ideas and views (Mouffe, 1999). Chambers persuasively argued that we should pay particular attention, not to that minority, which continuously displays allegiance to the extreme-right ideology, but rather the undecided-majority, which can be easily persuaded by the populist arguments of the far-right. We should create fruitful conditions for the counter-publics to function. Since the issue involved a distortion of indisputable facts of history and the praise of mass violence, in addition to the battle through democratic means, interference of an arbiter was necessary. The historical revisionism, when it involves the praise of violence, cannot be combatted through democratic means. It requires explicit condemnation of disturbing symbols in public space to enable lesson-learning. Democracy presupposes a dialogue, but on the condition of equal arms, and in some instances equality of arms implies the state's interference.

### 6.3 | Resistance

Resistance takes a variety of forms. Here we see the anonymous reaction of individuals, peaceful response to a peaceful erection of the monument. According to Foucault's theory on microfascisms (1977), resistance starts from oneself—by asking oneself, observing, evaluating own convictions from time-to-time, and acknowledging and fighting the instances of a blunt desire for power within ourselves. For this, Foucault's notion of self-care and self-formation as a form of resistance is particularly important (as quoted in Thompson, 2003, p. 114). Foucault's concept of "care of the self" implies opposing the power and finding new ways to "find nonfascist forms of sociality" (Thompson, 2003, p. 114). The power is based on totalization – namely, "the specification of fundamental identities and the construction of governable typologies" (Thompson, 2003, p. 116). For Foucault, "in order to create new forms of subjectivity," resistance should reject the goal, rather than the practice (Thompson, 2003, p. 125). The monument to Stalin pursues a particular goal, which not only lacks tolerance but praises what Stalin represents – crimes against humanity. The act of resistance, namely, the pouring of paint on the monument, rejected the goal of the monument.

Baudrillard's call to fighting the "political over-control" represents a continuity of the argument pursued by Foucault (2002, p. 22). The "care of the self" would be rejecting the state's attempts to create governable entities. According to Baudrillard (2002), too much of state control results in a sterile society. The excessive state control, in turn, creates a society incapable of thinking independently. One needs a moderate number of questionable ideals for resisting and to avoid the calcification of minds. Following this logic, the far-right groups allow keeping the society in healthy shape as they create prospects for resistance and counter-publics to combat "an epistemic of consensus, from growing political leukemia and delinquency, and the invisible transparency of the state," which represents violence *per se* (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 25). A stagnant life creates fertile grounds for unhealthy cells to develop, and therefore, one needs viruses in our body to keep the immunity (and life) going (Baudrillard, 2002). Consequently, one always needs grounds to exercise creative resistance.

## 6.4 | Violence to condemn violence?

We refer not only to the actions of the “Russian Spirit,” but of civil society, which poured the red paint on the monument twice. One way to demoralize the response of civil society is to label the act of vandalizing as violence. In this case, the vandalizing acts are justified; violence of this kind does not make the civil society, “uncivil.” If the red paint represents violence, the monument also represents violence. The actions of the “Russian Spirit” are opposite of the civil disobedience—the form (erection of the monument) is not violent, but the content is. That is, what the monument represents is inherently violent. It is justifiable to symbolically condemn violence publicly. The civil society played the role of a silent judge. An act of vandalizing shows that the representation of someone responsible for systematic and widespread terror and crimes is not welcomed in the public space. The act of pouring red paint is not an act of violence; it is instead an attempt at a more accurate representation by revealing the violent character of the monument through vandalizing it.

It is essential to understand what Stalin represents to the “Russian Spirit,” as they might not see him as a perpetrator. The “Russian Spirit” argues that Stalin signifies economic stability, a healthy lifestyle, and strong communal values. What is more important to this group, is that Stalin epitomizes the victory in WWII, uncompromising discipline, economic growth, and military strength at any cost—even if the cost is the lives of hundreds of thousand people, enforced displacement, and gulags. They admire his style of “management” when the punishment for disobeying or loss of favor was arbitrary and inhumane. One can see this, for example, in the posters with a message that the ill-management and corruption of today require “Stalinist methods.” The “Russian Spirit” does not deny Stalin’s crimes but rather justifies prosecutions, arguing that the “sacrifice” was worth the result. They praise the harsh methods, claiming that this is the only way to manage society. The imperial rhetoric of great power, hegemonic rule, the neo-Cold War imperative, reaffirms their admiration of “harsh methods.” “[T]he deadly violence generates a feeling of growth, of strength, of power, even of immortality” (Han & Demarco, 2018, p. 12). They consider the continuation of Stalin’s politics in modern-day Russia as the only way to resolve the problems of today, which they do not deny.

As argued by Han and Demarco (2018), “Killing has an *intrinsic* value. It is not a mimetic but a *capitalistic* principle that controls the archaic economy of violence. The more violence a person carried out, the more power he accumulated” (p. 10). The “Russian Spirit” praises the “accumulated” power of Stalin. The number of killings is not merely a figure—it is a trophy; a demonstration of how one takes a firm stance with respect to leadership of the country. They admire the very rhetoric of discipline by stating that Stalin adhered to the strict discipline himself. The absence of freedoms during the Stalinist rule, in their view, generated “cleaner and purer” society—without “Western filth and degradation,” they see, for example, in LGBTQ rights movements or punk music.

Han and Demarco (2018) make a similar argument to Foucault, arguing that by internalizing violence the subject becomes easier to be controlled and ruled. When violence becomes embedded in one’s consciousness, it manifests itself internally: “Violence is naturalized, as it were. Without the effort of physical, martial violence, it ensures that the established ruling relationship is maintained” (p. 7). By imbedding the praise of violence within themselves, groups like the “Russian Spirit” become easily governable entities by the regime. As with fascism, violence takes a variety of forms. It is more complex than its physical manifestation.

The monument to Stalin is a continuation of persecution as it dehumanizes the victims of repressions, claiming that their life is less important than the arguable “contribution to a big cause.” In *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Jeremy Waldron argues: “Some speech about others and their fundamental identities and commitments is simply so uncivil, so intolerant, degrading, and disrespectful that it constitutes a form of persecution against which a tolerant society can and should act” (as quoted in Bejan, 2017, p. 7). Assmann (2018) convincingly argues that not the memory itself is dangerous, but the inbuilt argumentation. This goes directly to the heart of revisionism—as it confuses the guilt and innocence, making the guilty parties seem innocent. In cases like that, Assmann (2018) argues, a clear demarcation must be made of who is who. The praise of violence is equitable to the violence itself and must be condemned.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The short life of the monument to Stalin in a Siberian town opened a plethora of questions concerning characteristics and defining features of civil society. Its role with respect to the memory of the past, the debate about freedom of speech and revisionism, forces one to rethink the response to the initiative and the very notion of violence itself. Some of the questions examined were: How much tolerance one needs for civil society, which uses conflict and controversial speech not to contest but reaffirm the status quo? To what extent one should accept the views, different from one's own to be considered "tolerant"? Should we allow the monument of a henchman to be, so as not to use the very same tactics the perpetrator used when silencing those who disagreed?

Kopecky and Mudde's (2003) argument that it is risky to put labels on civil society has been reaffirmed, not only because one needs the "bad" for the "good" to manifest, but also because of the fluid and ever-evolving nature of civil society. It is impossible to objectively assess civil society without focusing on a particular activity at a specific moment in time.

By erecting the monument to Stalin, the "Russian Spirit," although broke the law due to the absence of formal permission, it still acted in line with the policy of the state concerning the Soviet repressions, thus reaffirming the status quo. The discourse around the monument pointed to intolerance, disrespectful of pluralism and morality narrative, but lacked criminality and violence, the two characteristics that need rethinking. Importantly, civility takes a variety of shapes and forms, allowing us to go beyond one fixed understanding of what "civility" entails. The concept of "civility" and its constitutive elements and boundaries shall be elaborated upon through the discursive possibilities that civil society provides (Markus, 2001).

Sometimes the discursive possibilities imply a justified act of violence towards the monument, as it meant to condemn the violence the monument represents. It forced us to reassess and "to understand the history of violence from which we emerge" (Critchley, 2018, p. 21). Posttotalitarianism implies the introduction of a different form of violence, based on the manipulation of the realm of appearance when the division within society is more problematic than the gap between a perpetrator and a victim (Havel, 1985). The existence of "uncivil" initiatives coming from civil society demonstrate more prominent debates to engage. In this case, it showcases the particularities of the politics of public memory in the country. Rather than merely restricting individual acts and treating the symptoms, one should ask more profound questions on how to deal with what causes admiration of perpetrators, by resisting these instances and advocating for comprehensive approaches towards addressing the legacies of the past abuse.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are of the author.

<sup>2</sup> "Russky Dukh"—the original name of the group in Russian. "Dukh" could also be translated from Russian as "soul," "mind," "ghost," "ambience," "spirit," or "mind." It could be a reference to a line from the poem of Alexander Pushkin: "Tam russkii duh, tam Rusyu pahnet" ("there is Russian spirit, there is the smell of Russia").

<sup>3</sup> The leader of the organization argued that the proximity of Stalin's bust to the planned monument for victims of repressions was a coincidence they found out about on the day of erection. The choice of place is strategic as associated with soldiers departing to the fighting front during WWII and where a fish cannery factory was located, which

- worked for the benefits of the army. [http://www.ugra.aif.ru/society/vozvrashchenie\\_vozhdya\\_kto\\_i\\_zachem\\_ustanavlivaet\\_v\\_regionah\\_pamyatniki\\_stalinu](http://www.ugra.aif.ru/society/vozvrashchenie_vozhdya_kto_i_zachem_ustanavlivaet_v_regionah_pamyatniki_stalinu) According to the leader of the organization "Russian Spirit," Denis Khanzhin, the majority of the population of the city Surgut supported the monument to Stalin. Khanzhin argued that 60% (out of around 6,000 respondents) voted in favor of the memorial on social media. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3599480>
- <sup>4</sup> The group uses "nonelite" to explain that they are "from people" and do not represent the interests of those in power.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://rd86.ru/>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://vk.com/id307954683>
- <sup>7</sup> *Soviet Russia*, p. 2, 13.03.1998. <http://www.revolucia.ru/nmprr.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> "Poslanie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina Federal'nomu sobraniyu RF: 2005" Rossiiskaya Gazeta (Moscow), April 26th, 2005, pp. 1–4.
- <sup>9</sup> In Russia, it is a stage when most the victims and direct descendants of victims are no longer alive.
- <sup>10</sup> <https://vk.com/id307954683>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://vk.com/id307954683>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://rd86.ru/>
- <sup>13</sup> [https://vk.com/denis\\_khanzhin](https://vk.com/denis_khanzhin)
- <sup>14</sup> "Posle smerti na moyu mogilu nanesut mnogo musora. No veter istorii resveet yego."
- <sup>15</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/10/25/70294-iosif-stalin-tipovoy-proekt?mobile=true>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/10/25/70294-iosif-stalin-tipovoy-proekt?mobile=true>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/10/25/70294-iosif-stalin-tipovoy-proekt?mobile=true>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/10/25/70294-iosif-stalin-tipovoy-proekt?mobile=true>
- <sup>19</sup> [https://www.znak.com/2016-12-08/zhitel\\_surguta\\_arestovan\\_za\\_publichnuyu\\_demonstratsiyu\\_portreta\\_generala\\_vlasova](https://www.znak.com/2016-12-08/zhitel_surguta_arestovan_za_publichnuyu_demonstratsiyu_portreta_generala_vlasova)
- <sup>20</sup> [https://www.znak.com/2016-12-08/zhitel\\_surguta\\_arestovan\\_za\\_publichnuyu\\_demonstratsiyu\\_portreta\\_generala\\_vlasova](https://www.znak.com/2016-12-08/zhitel_surguta_arestovan_za_publichnuyu_demonstratsiyu_portreta_generala_vlasova)
- <sup>21</sup> 'Nasha pamyat'
- <sup>22</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/10/25/70294-iosif-stalin-tipovoy-proekt?mobilenonbreakingspace=true>
- <sup>23</sup> <http://rd86.ru/pochemu-rastyot-populyarnost-stalina-dmitrij-buriev/>
- <sup>24</sup> "Civility" as used in this work, is not to be confused with "civilized," the notion that may have a (post)colonial undertone.
- <sup>25</sup> Though Margalit applies this definition to "decency," I still use the term "civility." A decent society, according to Margalit, is the one where institutions do not humiliate people, and civil—the one where fellow citizens do not humiliate others. Margalit's distinction between the two notions is somewhat blurred; I follow him in that as well. Although Markus applies a sharp distinction between the concepts, according to her, "decency" provides for a more substantive understanding of moral engagement, which cannot be captured by the term "civility" alone. I believe that civility encompasses moral engagement as well. The paper unites the normative charge of the concept "decency" and the instrumentality of the concept of "civility" into one.
- <sup>26</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/10/25/70294-iosif-stalin-tipovoy-proekt?mobile=true>
- <sup>27</sup> Although the decision of the Supreme Court of Israel is provided here as a positive example, it does not mean that the author endorses all other decisions of the same body.

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